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ABSTRACT

School buildings designed in Norway during the early 1970s were frequently of the open plan type. This document briefly describes problems faced in the designing of open plan buildings and planning and implementation of educational activities appropriate to the new facilities. In anticipation of future elementary school construction, the document lists factors operating for and against the spread of the open plan concept. (PGD)

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Management Analysis Paper

Open Schools in Norway

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OPEN SCHOOLS IN NORWAY

by

Torleiv Reitan

I. BACKGROUND

The first open school in Norway was opened in 1968. In 1970-1971 about ten open schools were built. In the autumn of 1971 about sixty communes had built or were building schools that were different from traditional ones. Today there are about 100 open schools in the country. Half of these are elementary schools (age 1 - 6), about twenty are "combined schools" (age 1 - 9) and the rest, about 30 schools, are "youth schools" (age 7 - 9). Several communes also have open schools under construction.

Most of these schools are built around certain centres: the Fredrikstad region (south east of Oslo), Oslo-Bærum-Asker region (Oslo and the western communities), Kristiansand (on the south coast) and Bergen (on the west coast). In addition, there are isolated schools spread over the whole country.

If one were to ask the following questions: What is the direct reason for building this new type of school in Norway? What were the intentions of the initiators when they built them? - then the correct answer is difficult to find.

In most cases, it all started on the basis of a local initiative. In certain cases, it can be shown that individuals played a decisive role. This has usually been the school director (or another active educator) in a commune, or an architect with interest and experience in the building of schools.

After a while, central authorities were also brought into the picture. The National Council for Innovation in Education (Forsøksrådet for skoleverket) was responsible for the follow-up at the central level. In 1970 a project committee for open schools was created, with the mandate to facilitate experiments to include curriculum innovations and organisation in the new type of school. In addition, one of the consultants in Forsøksrådet had open schools as his special field since 1970.

The task carried out by Forsøksrådet has been especially that of disseminating information to teachers in the new schools. The Council has organised a number of courses, both for teachers and for headmasters. Discussion about methods of work and curriculum organisation in open schools has been central to these courses, in addition, of course, to the duties and functions of the headmasters.

In spite of the fact that the central authorities have been active in this field, the initiative has most often come

from the local level. The situation today is that planning and decision making on open schools is done in the local communities. Only in a small way do the central authorities influence the developments in this area. There are no written regulations from the State to narrow the range of choice regarding type of school for the different communities.

Only to a small extent has additional money been provided for open schools. In a few cases some money has been provided for courses and seminars, and for travelling scholarships for teachers. When it comes to physical resources, teaching/learning material and audio-visual aids, these schools are given the same resources as others.

Follow-up and evaluation

Because the open schools, in most cases,are the result of local initiative, and because the central authorities have mainly had a passive role, the state authorities have not developed any systematic follow-up or evaluation of the open schools. Evaluation that has been carried out has been connected with the educational administration at the local level. Examples of such work are the evaluation in Kristiansand (the Fagerholt report), in Bærum (the Ringstabekk report) and in Oslo (the Obu project).

Besides these local evaluation projects, the University of Trondheim, in the autumn of 1971, started a project called "The open school. A research project on school building". This project is built around an interdisciplinary team, with architects and pedagogues engaged in the work.

In addition to the purely statistical and analytical work, the project in Trondheim has tried to synthesise the experience the users have had with the new type of schools as of this date. It is expected that the project will deliver several reports during the spring of 1974.

What is meant by OPEN SCHOOLS?

Since the initiative for the new type of school has come from various local communities, it is difficult to identify the underlying rationale and ideas.

If we look to other countries and try to get some clarity on the subject of why schools with an open plan are being built, we will discover that the two terms open school (åpen skole) and open education (åpen pedagogikk) have different meanings. In Sweden, the term "open school" means a flexible school. Both the terms, open school and flexible school,are terms related to the building. The reason behind the new type of school seems to be: we are living in a society in rapid change. This has consequences for the school: a new curriculum, new methods of work and new teaching/learning material. In this situation, the schools have to be built in such a way that they can meet contemporary needs and, at the same time,

can meet the needs of tomorrow's society. Therefore flexible schools.

In American educational debate the terms open school and open education are a bit unclear. In the beginning the term open school was connected with the physical plan. After some years, the terms have been coloured by the English tradition. And finally the terms seem to have gained a social or socio-pedagogical content. Open school and open classroom are used to describe an alternative to the traditional school, which is described as a rigid system. The alternative which is described is a school with maximum freedom and creativity, where the teachers and students together plan meaningful tasks and activities.

In England it is the curriculum (both content and methods of work) more than the school building which is of importance in the term of open plan school. The term is mainly used for the planning and development of the teaching/learning activities, or more exactly, the concept has to do with the way in which the teaching/learning process takes place.

The situation in Norway: we have seen that the term open varies and that the term open school can refer both to the physical plan and to the educational activities. If the terms are unclear in other countries, this is certainly true of Norway too. The real situation in Norway seems to be that the term open school is mainly used for the physical plan. There are attempts, however, to give the term a clearly educational significance. In the general way the term is used, even among educators, it is the physical plan that gives the term meaning.

II. ANALYSIS

The tasks and problems that have faced teachers and school leaders from the very start has differed from school to school. The reasons are many: the schools that started these experiments have probably had the greatest problems. The educational planning has differed from school to school. In some schools the headmaster and the teachers have had good time to prepare themselves; in others the planning and development work has been very meagre indeed. Economic circumstances have influenced the degree of planning, since some communities have had the economic opportunity to carry out proper planning, whereas others have lacked these resources.

Initial problems and difficulties

1. In many cases the headmaster and the teachers have not, or only to a minor degree, been involved in the planning of the school. With time this has changed, to the extent that it is now common for the communes and others to hire the headmaster some time before the opening of the school. Also, teachers are more involved in the

planning of the building. Teachers are used as members of planning committees, or as consultants. But, since these teacher representatives most often have little experience of work in this type of school, what they have been able to offer in terms of expertise has been limited.

2. At the start of the open schools, the teachers have most often been ill-prepared for the working situation that these schools demand. One has tried to help in this situation by sending the headmaster, and perhaps also groups of teachers, to similar schools in other communities, or to other countries (Sweden, England). In certain cases such visits have been useful. But several factors make this practice of limited value: firstly, for purely practical or economic reasons only a small number of teachers in the new schools can make such study visits. Secondly, the receiving schools have had little possibility to assist the visiting teams in any real sense. Information and consulting services are beyond the realm of headmasters and teachers and frequent visits have therefore become an increased burden on the schools. This is easy to understand, since these schools have only been in operation themselves for a short time.

3. Often, the schools have started without the active involvement of the parents in the planning work. In several schools, therefore, information and discussion meetings with the parents have been planned. In most cases, the schools themselves are of the opinion that these meetings have been important for the ongoing development work.

4. In certain communities, open schools at the intermediate level (grades 7 - 9) have been built, while the elementary schools (grade 1 - 6) are of a traditional type[1]. To make it easier for the students to start the work in a new teaching/learning environment, time has been taken to train the students in the techniques of independent study and in cooperative work. This is, as the teachers see it, both important and necessary. But at the same time it is stressed that the transfer is difficult, and that old working routines are difficult to change. It is a common view among teachers that students should be trained in good study techniques from a very early age, if possible from the first grade.

Problems and difficulties in the implementation stage

1. During visits to schools one is often reminded of the

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(1) With the introduction of the comprehensive school in Norway, a rather large building programme was needed at the intermediate level.

central role of the headmaster. In many cases, the headmaster has had a special interest, and also special qualifications for his job. In other cases, he has been given his job without having any particular qualifications.

Both occasional visits and the few reports that are available (e.g. the Fagerholt report) seem to indicate the central importance of the headmaster in these schools. Where the headmaster has leadership skills both in administrative and educational terms, the school is an interesting and challenging place to work for both teachers and students.

It is of great importance that the headmaster knows laws and regulations, particularly those related to the economy and the organisation of the curriculum. Headmasters who are able to see new possibilities and who are less restricted to traditional ways of solving problems, are more able to exploit the possibilities that do exist, particularly in the new type of school.

2. The open schools give the teachers new tasks and new difficulties. Even when one knows this in advance, it becomes more evident after a while! Then, the need for consultation, cooperation and assistance is more obvious. On the local level, a lot of work is done in this area, in fact far beyond what is normally expected of teachers. Since, in practice, it is difficult to organise meetings for the whole staff or groups of teachers in normal school time, this work has to be done in the afternoon or the evening(1).

Central authorities have provided some help in terms of information and guidance. Several conferences and seminars for headmasters and teachers have been arranged. Usually, each school has been invited to send one or more teachers. The reasoning behind this type of course is that course participants will take their learning back to their colleagues in the schools. Discussions with headmasters and teachers make it clear that this type of course has limited value.

3. Timetabling is a problem in these schools, particularly with the demand for in-service activities of teachers. One of the difficulties is the way the teachers' working time is defined, i.e. a certain number of lecture hours. This incentive structure determines to a large extent the organisation of the teaching/learning process and limits the freedom of the headmaster.

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(1) Teachers in Norway are paid for a certain number of lecture hours, not for the time they actually work in the school.

4. In the recruitment of teachers for these schools, certain factors have been important. The general education of teachers is inadequate in relation to the tasks these new schools represent, and several teachers have applied for posts in these schools without relevant experience or knowledge. This has created problems for the school and for the teachers. In some of the intermediate schools, several teachers have come from the old theoretical "real-skole" (the first stage of the grammar school). Head-masters in some schools, and also some teachers, find that this represents a particular problem. In the solving of more practical problems, as well as in the general attitude towards the teaching/learning process, this category of teacher does have a different background.

5. A general problem seems to be that teachers are not fully aware of the ideas behind the new type of school. One of the questions often asked is: What does one want to achieve with this new type of school (and understood: and which one cannot achieve in traditional schools)?

Many teachers have a need for clarification on this point. It would help teachers to find the task more meaningful and give direction to future work.

The situation today

For several years to come, Norway will be building primary schools. Most communes will discuss the possibility of building schools that are different from traditional ones. Decisions will have to be taken without clear data that can provide the decision makers with a rationale, showing the clear advantages these schools have over traditional schools. In the following we will try to relate those factors that are regarded as forces to strengthen the development of open schools and forces that will weaken the possibility for the dissemination of this innovation in the future:

Positive factors

1. The individual communes have great freedom in the development of school buildings.
2. There is a general tendency in the Norwegian school system to decentralise decision making in relation both to economic questions and to the curriculum.
3. Central authorities are now favourable to the new type of school.

Negative factors

1. There is still lack of clarity among school leaders and teachers in relation to the educational rationale for the new type of school.
2. Several laws and regulations are barriers to the type of cooperation and flexible use of resources necessary in open schools.
3. Teacher education is not adequate. Teachers are not well enough prepared for the new tasks.

4. Teachers, both those who work in open schools and others, are mainly favourable towards the new schools.

5. Evaluation, although scattered, seems to indicate positive results.

6. Most open schools are primary schools (grade 1 - 6). It is an advantage to start open schools from the first grade.

7. Several school architects are well oriented in educational affairs, and know about the experience of open schools abroad.

8. Cooperation among teachers in open schools makes it easier to handle disciplinary problems and strengthen the teaching/learning process.

4. There is some resistance among school leaders and teachers to the open school.

5. Open schools have come in a time when several major changes have taken place in the elementary school. This makes the situation for the teachers more difficult.

6. In some cases, parents are unsure and even negative towards the new schools.

7. There is some resistance on the political level.

8. Some teachers find it difficult to cooperate with other teachers. This is particularly difficult in the new schools that demand cooperation among teachers.